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ABSTRACT

Prepared under authority of the Economic Opportunity Act, this paper gives guidelines on developing jobs and new careers for the disadvantaged within Federal, state, and local government merit systems. Typical personnel structures are described, followed by elements of merit evaluation and selection, staffing and classification, characteristics of merit systems, steps in initiating action and securing approval, and basic approaches to creating New Careers job descriptions and structures within merit system agencies. Four diagrams are included. (LY)

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Merit Systems And New Careers

by Joseph H. McClure

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Points to Remember

Introduction

Civil service or merit systems exist at all levels of government in varying degrees of sophistication (federal, state, county, or city) but not necessarily wherever there is a governmental body. Many states, for example, only have merit systems serving agencies receiving Federal grants-in-aid. As a New Careers project director or job developer, you may very likely find yourself having to deal with agencies subject to merit procedures.

This paper has been written to help you learn about merit systems. A knowledge of their structure and how they operate will better enable you to deal with these systems for the overall good of your program. It is to your benefit to speak to personnel officials and merit system administrators from an informed point of view as to how merit examining can be practically applied to New Careers positions.

Understanding Merit Systems

Purpose and Background

Merit systems throughout the United States reflect the hope of the American people that individuals involved in administering the affairs of the Nation, its states, and its local governments can be recruited, examined, and appointed to public positions on some more or less fair and equitable basis. Merit system rules and regulations apply also to the training, promotion, and retention of employees.

It was not too long ago, in the history of the United States, that political patronage was the accepted means of filling governmental positions, and public employees were hired and fired with every change of administration. The Jacksonian era is particularly remembered as the zenith of the "spoils system."

Politics is almost completely removed from the Federal job system. In the Executive Branch, more than 95% of all positions are covered by the Civil Service system. The remaining 5% are primarily high-echelon policy-making positions reserved for presidential appointees. These are individuals who work closely with the President in the implementation of his programs, and therefore must be of similar mind.

The hiring and firing and promotion procedures of state and local governments are much less "merit" oriented, and will present you with your most difficult job development challenges.

Senator Edmund Muskie noted before the Congress in January, 1967, that:

> *. . . of a total of 2 million state employees in 1965, less than a million were under a merit system. In 26 states, only 50 percent of full-time employees were covered, and in 12 states, coverage was minimal.*

Personnel Structures

A good understanding of the merit system will enable you to better develop jobs within merit system agencies. How successful you are in creating desirable career ladders, and how successful you are in placing New Careerists in permanent assignments depends upon how knowledgeable you are of the personnel structure of a specific agency or department; how much you know about the authority it has to restructure jobs, to classify new positions, and to set qualifications standards.

Diagram No. 1:

State and Large City Governments

It is very probable that you will have at least 3 independent merit systems to deal with if you are operating in a metropolitan area. However, regardless of the independence of the systems, there are two basic personnel structures with which you should be familiar:

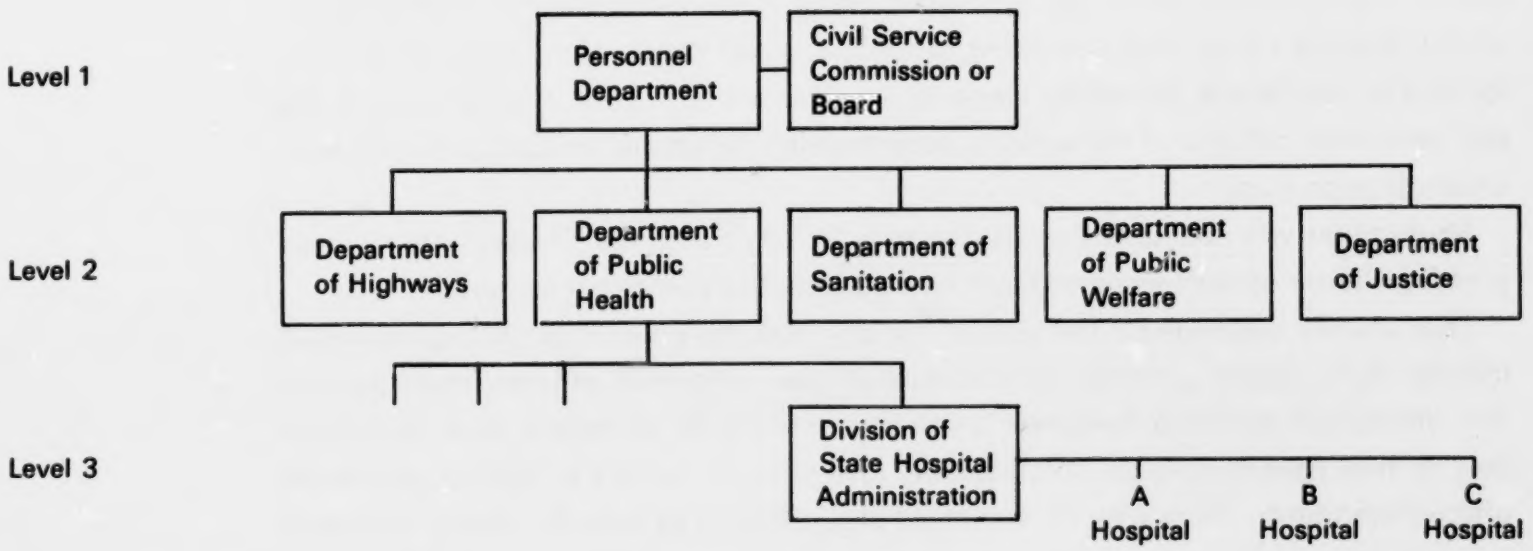
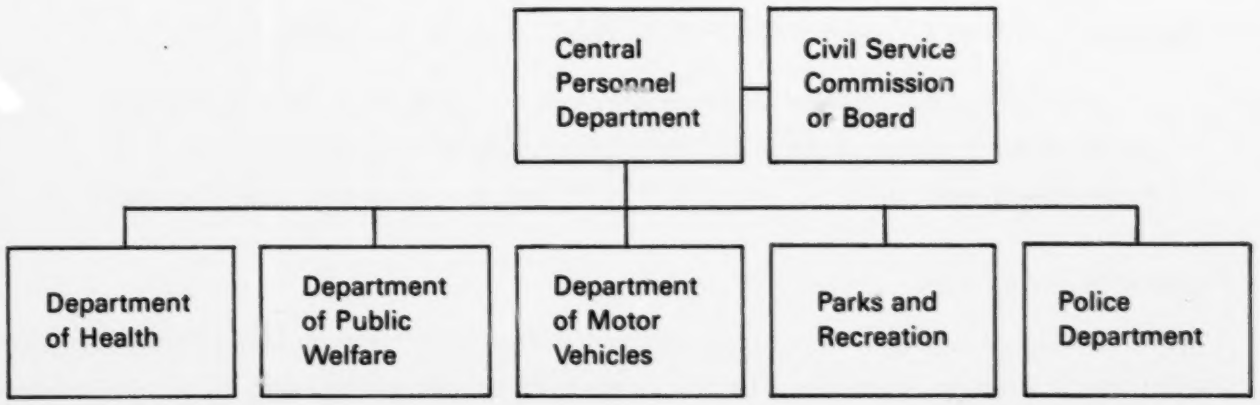


Diagram No. 2:

Smaller City Governments



Larger cities (e.g., Los Angeles, Chicago, New York), will generally have a personnel department administering civil service laws. The Civil Service Board acts in accordance with general laws which have been enacted by the city council or other appropriate legislative bodies. A Board is usually appointive and its members serve limited terms. Civil Service Boards, where they exist, will not generally be of concern to a project director or job developer. For it is the administrative interpretation of the Board's ruling that you must influence. And, these interpretations are performed in the Central Personnel Department. You will find yourself dealing with the city personnel office and the various departmental personnel offices generally even where Boards exist.

Many cities will not have Boards, leaving the city Personnel Department to interpret legislation as well as administer and operate the personnel system.

This usually depends on the size of the city and the governmental organizations located there. Some agencies may have their own personnel offices. These personnel offices will *not* have the power to change standards, reclassify jobs, determine pay, or hire people who do not meet the civil service board's or central personnel office's standards. They will, for the most part, administer specific personnel needs

of their organization, i.e., selection from certificates of eligibles, terminating employees, disciplinary actions, maintenance of leave and attendance records for pay purposes, recommending changes in job classifications, recommending changes in selection methods, etc.

Examining, changes in/and the establishment of new qualifications standards, and the approval of position classifications and reclassifications are centralized in the central personnel office.

State and large city personnel structures will generally have at least three levels. For example, Diagram No. 1 shows a Department of Public Welfare at Level 2 which has its own departmental personnel office, and at Level 3, a Division of State Hospital Administration. Each state hospital has a personnel office.

Elements of the System

Before proceeding, the following terms should be understood because of their importance in the discussion that follows and because of the necessity for you to be able to *understand* and *speak* the language of "personnelists."

1. *Merit System and Civil Service,* for the most part, are used interchangeably and refer to the procedure consisting of laws, rules, and regulations governing the recruitment, appointment, training, promotion, etc., of individuals in or seeking "civil" or public service jobs.
2. *Register* is a list of eligibles established as a result of a specific examination announcement. Separate registers are established for every distinct examination announcement.
3. *Examination* is the process of determining an individual's qualifications for a given position. Examinations may be either written (assembled) or nonwritten (unassembled). Nonwritten examinations usually consist of an evaluation of the applicant's experience and education.
4. *Examination Announcement* is a public issuance declaring vacancies or the anticipation of vacancies. Examination announcements may be open for a specific period of time (e.g.,

two weeks, one month, or indefinitely). Announcements generally describe the duties of the position, the qualifications required, the location of the position and the salary.

5. *Open Competition* is the basis of merit examining. It embodies the idea that all individuals are entitled to apply for public service jobs, and that people who want jobs in merit system agencies must, at some point, compete on an open and equal basis with all other individuals desirous of the same job or jobs. The usual procedure is to issue a public announcement and rate all applicants under the same criteria (most likely a written test).
6. *Certification* is the act of pulling names from a register and sending them to an agency for employment consideration. The certification process usually begins when an agency (e.g., Welfare Department) sends to the Civil Service Commission a Request for Certification. The Request will specify the kind of vacancy, (e.g., Nurse, Community Worker, etc.,) the number of vacancies, where the job(s) is (are) located and the salary.

   The names and applications taken from the appropriate list will then be sent to the agency on a certificate of eligibles.
7. *Rule-of-Three* refers to the certification and selection from a Certificate of Eligibles that will follow the rule-of-three; i.e., the top three names on the register will be sent in response to an agency's request. If the agency has one vacancy, it can select from among the three names it received without regard to score. In some states, certification and selection are allowed within the top five eligible and available candidates.
8. *Preference* is the awarding of point or special consideration to specific groups, e.g., veterans.
9. *Qualifications Standard* refers to the educational and experience requirements determined to be necessary for particular jobs. The setting of qualifications standards is usually a joint effort between the agency and the Civil Service Commission.

10. *Position Classification* is the act of segmenting related duties and assigning a responsibility level in accordance with standard guidelines. The classification process usually involves a determination regarding the: (1) type of work; and/or (2) level of work.

To illustrate, let us look at a simplified classification structure with numerical categories 101-110.

101 — Typist
102 — File Clerk
103 — Stenographer
104 — Secretary
105 — Welfare Assistant
106 — Nursing Assistant
107 — Fireman
108 — Policeman
109 — Outreach Worker
110 — Social Worker

Each number refers to a specific occupation. A position classifier is called by an agency to look at specific jobs or duties within that agency. The classifier will be concerned with either or both of the following:

a. Determining the numerical category of the particular job, and
b. Determining the responsibility level.

Responsibility levels are necessary in order to differentiate between education and experience. (For example, the Nursing Assistant duties requiring only a high school education and paying a salary of $2.00 per hour, and the Nursing Assistant duties requiring a high school education plus one year of experience, which pays $2.25 per hour.)

Staff

Personnel operations once removed from the civil service board (e.g., the Personnel Department in Diagram #1, and the Central Personnel Department in Diagram #2) will be staffed to perform four basic functions: (1) wage and salary determina-

tions, (2) write classification standards and perform position classifications, (3) write and validate qualifications measurement techniques, and (4) conduct an ongoing examining program. To illustrate:

Pay	Position Classification	Qualifications Standards	Examining
Establish stds. for/ and maintain equity between various types of work and differing levels of responsibility.	Set stds., for evaluating work activities to determine what kind of work is being performed, e.g., typing as opposed to nursing, as opposed to program management Conduct periodic and special reviews to verify specific job classifications; that is, ascertain that the work being performed is actually what it was previously classified to be, and/or at the responsibility level it was once determined to be.	Develop rating methods Determine what qualifications are necessary to perform (1) a specific kind of work, and (2) a specific level of responsibility	Issues announcements of vacancies Conducts examinations Rates and ranks competitors Maintains register and certifies names of candidates to agencies upon the agency's request

Characteristics/Traits of Merit Systems

Rigidity

There is a natural tendency in our society to preserve the status quo. This is not only a peculiarity of individuals, but a trait exhibited by organizations, businesses, and governmental bodies. In fact, governments through their various civil service systems offer an excellent example of how this inclination for "keeping things as

they are'' functions in today's society. The administration of the merit systems at all levels of government has been rigid and exacting. Advances outside the Federal system are practically nonexistent. In the Federal system, any advances and modifications in the overall examining process have only come about in recent years.

The Policing Function

Many merit systems appear to function as ''guardians'' of the public trust. Some may use their energies and talents to ''police'' the hiring and other personnel activities of agencies. This policing attitude reinforces the rigidity of the system and pressures it to adopt ''special'' techniques and practices which ''screen out'' individuals who, although lacking in experience and education, nonetheless have potential.

Administrative versus Legislative Rulings

Merit systems are the result of law but many of the procedures and methods (e.g., hiring, examining, etc.) are the result of ''administrative'' decisions. Most civil service or merit system ordinances do not specify all the practical aspects of the merit system operation. These operating decisions are made by the people who administer the law. Consequently, changes in the merit system procedure may:

a. Involve negotiating with the state or local governing body for basic modifications in a particular ordinance, or
b. Require discussions with agency and Civil Service Commissions administrators.

Most of the regulations are administrative, but changing them is complicated by the difficulty of determining whose policy they represent and who has the authority to change them. Even if a state or local government and its chief executive are in favor of revising hiring requirements, little may be achieved, because they may have no control over the local civil service commission. To keep it out of politics, it may have been established as an independent agency.[1]

[1]Judith C. Benjamin, *Civil Service and the Poor: Some New Developments* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p.3.

Working with Merit Systems

Initiating Action

Let us assume that you wish to approach a Hospital Personnel Officer and discuss the possibility of using New Careerists in that hospital. (See Diagram #1).

Should you contact one of the hospitals first? The Departmental Personnel office at Level 2? Or, the Personnel Department at Level 1?

There are no easy answers to these questions. However, it is wise, both for your own knowledge and in the anticipation of future need that you contact the state merit system administrators in the state personnel office (Level 1). Before attempting to work with the system at any level, first find out how rigidly the system is administered and what are its peculiarities. Merit system administrators will appreciate being contacted and will certainly respond more favorably to your later inquiries or requests. Unless you are faced with a unique situation, *contact merit system administrators before you need a special favor.* A meeting will also enable you to determine their attitude, measure their receptiveness, and familiarize yourself with the system. You will then be in a better position to make your next contact.

Now, should your next contact be at Level 2 or Level 3?

Ordinarily you can make as much headway at this point by contacting the hospital at Level 3 as you would by contacting the Departmental Personnel Office at Level 2. In your discussions with the Hospital, remember that the personnel office at this level *does* have the power to recommend changes in job classification and in qualifications standards. In fact, remember the following point as being of considerable importance to achieving your objectives:

> Changes in job classification and job standards can originate at any level. *However,* the changes most usually occur because personnel officers at the lower levels request them in order to accommodate some need. In the preceding example, the State Personnel Officer at Level 1 does not usually originate specific changes, but instead responds to changes which are requested

by Personnel Officers at Level 2. Personnel Officers at Level 2 are usually acting in response to requests by Personnel Officers at Level 3.

Value of a New Ladder

This section is not intended to tell you how to develop jobs, but to point out one specific approach which may work to your *disadvantage* when developing jobs in merit system agencies, particularly when attempting to funnel para-professionals into an old-line profession such as Nursing.

The point to keep in mind is that adding on, or the developing of career ladders, through grouping of old established jobs presents *severe difficulties* in placing para-professionals as *permanent* employees.

Example: Using the state hospital as in the previous example, let us look at two ways of entering para-professionals into the Nursing profession.

Let us assume the state hospital has the following job categories:

Registered Nurse
Practical Nurse
Nursing Assistant
Nursing Aide

It would be very easy to group the positions in the above manner keying in the appropriate education, and thereby declaring a career ladder for New Careerists. But, do we really have a new career? Even if we add on a Nursing Aide Trainee category to allow for accepting individuals at the most minimal skill level?

Let us now look more closely at our hypothetical state hospital and the following career ladder:

Registered Nurse
Practical Nurse
Nursing Assistant
Nursing Aide
Nursing Aide Trainee

Although the above positions offer a natural and apparently reasonable career progression, we should be aware of the difficulty of *permanent placement* created

NOTE: It is *important* to recognize the value of placing New Careerists on a *permanent* basis from the beginning of their employment and *avoid* having to subject New Careerists to *written tests*.

by this structure. To bring New Careerists in at level (2) will subject them to the existing qualifications standard for Nursing Aide, which generally would be a written test. Keep in mind that we want to make every effort to avoid written tests.

There is no rule that says we cannot change existing standards. However, this is usually very difficult to do, especially when there are other choices available.

What other choices are open to us in this case? There are two alternatives:

Alternative 1

Accept the career structure in the above example and negotiate with the appropriate personnel officer for the establishment of the Nursing Aide Trainee position with the suitable qualifications standard; i.e., no written examination.

Alternative 2

Negotiate with the hospital to establish a new category of jobs. For example, a Hospital Service Assistant category could then be tailored specifically to New Careerists and could serve as the basis for the following career ladder:

Registered Nurse
Practical Nurse
Hospital Service Assistant III
Hospital Service Assistant II
Hospital Service Assistant I

This may appear to be merely a matter of semantics but the advantage of these new job designations is that flexibility is built into our career ladder. We may then set a series of new qualifications standards, as well as avoid any conflicts with the Nursing Aide and Nursing Assistant categories.

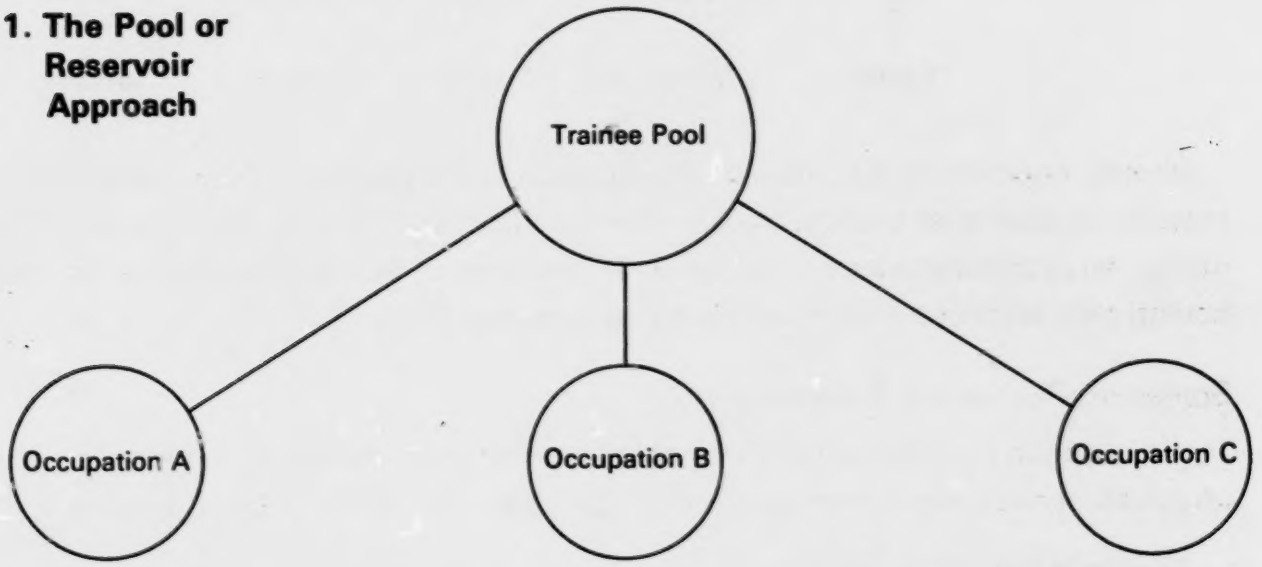
The points to be remembered are that:

a. new jobs or new job structures should be created wherever possible, in order to avoid running head-on with existing qualifications standards, and

b. non-written standards, appropriate to New Careerists, are not as diffcult to negotiate for new positions as for old established ones.

Basic Approaches to New Careers Job Structures in Merit System Agencies

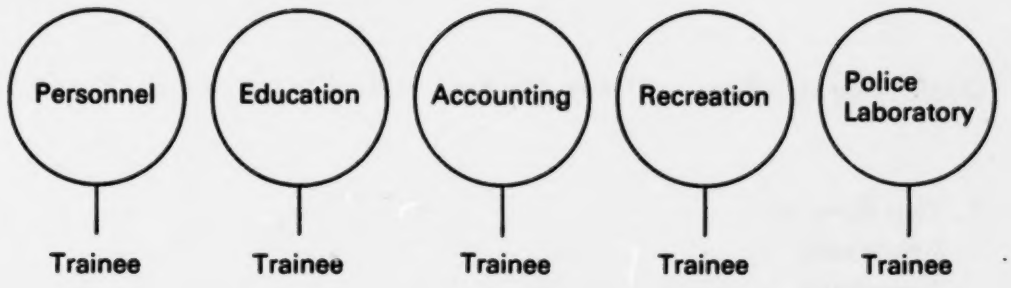
1. The Pool or Reservoir Approach



Many agencies will want to hire and train New Careerists as one group without initially attempting to place them in a specific occupation. This approach will usually consist of an orientation and general training period of three to six months or in some cases a full year. After this initial period, New Careerists will be given an opportunity to choose an occupational category in which they will then receive specialized training.

In some situations New Careerists can be allowed to receive elementary specialized training in two related occupations and defer a decision as to a specific occupation until the 18th or 24th month of training. The flexibility of this approach makes it highly desirable for hospital and law enforcement activities. It allows both the New Careerists and the employing agency to evaluate and, to some extent, experiment with alternatives.

2. The Straight-Line or Targeted Approach



Directly opposite to the "reservoir" approach is the placing of New Careerists in specific occupational training from the beginning of their employment period. This design is especially adapted to agencies desirous of hiring New Careerists, but having only scattered jobs in unrelated occupations areas.

Screening-Out versus Screening-In

Techniques which, intentionally or not, have kept poor people and minorities out of public service must now be used to get them into these jobs. Examples are:

Targeted publicity

(a) Publicizing job openings with vigor in neighborhoods where poor people live.

(b) Many types of jobs which involve community work can actually be restricted to community residents. Similarly, examination announcements can restrict competition to people living within the boundaries of the community.

Selected Certification

A technique through which agencies can request that certification from the register be restricted:

(a) To people with certain types of experience and/or talents.

(b) By geographical location.

(c) By background, e.g., ex-convict, ex-drug addict, welfare recipient.

(Note: This list of selective "factors" is by no means all-inclusive.)

Points to Remember

Know where power is vested.
It is to your overall advantage to understand the system with which you must deal.

Do not bypass merit system administrators.
Always contact the merit system administrators personally either first or early in your job development efforts. These are the people who make and/or interpret policy. They are essential to your efforts.

There are two kinds of standards.

Qualification Standards–job requirements, e.g., high school education, GED, college degree, written test, etc.

Classification Standards–the general rules or guides by which all positions are defined, by which Nursing Aide jobs are distinguished from the Registered Nursing positions and vice versa. Merit systems classify or categorize jobs numerically. There is always a number designation for every position. These designations are the key to locating qualifications standards.

Know where the final authority rests.
The authority to approve final changes in qualifications and classification standards is retained by the central personnel office or civil service board. Agencies or departments, through their personnel offices, (where they exist) have substantial power in being able to recommend specific changes.

The idea of "Competitive Examining" cannot be ignored.
Your interest is not in eliminating this concept but tailoring it to fit your needs.

Avoid head-on confrontation with the existing qualifications standards.
This is best done by developing new positions, not tying together existing ones.

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